



A TRIP ON THE PANAMA RAILROAD.*

"**W**OULD you like to go to Panama?" was the question propounded to one of our esteemed contributors. The track of the Panama Railroad had been completed from ocean to ocean, and the Company that had for five years been so lavishly casting its dollars upon the fever-haunted Isthmus, in the confident hope of finding them again, with increase, after many days, had resolved to give a grand celebration, with wining and dining and speechifying, in honor of the event.

It was January, and the thermometer stood at zero in New York, and mortal man could not be expected to resist the temptation to visit the tropics free of expense. So our friend returned an answer of acceptance to the formal note inviting him to assist in commemorating the important event, and instituted a search into the receptacles which contained last year's summer wardrobe, in preparation for the trip.

On the 5th of February the good steamer *George Law* left the wharf at New York, bearing, in addition to its usual miscellaneous crowd of Californian emigrants, the company of invited guests, and the United States Minister to Granada. A "Notice" to passengers, conspicuously posted up, intimating that no deadly weapons were to be worn on board, and no fire-arms discharged, and that it was out of order for any person to make his appearance at the dinner-table with his coat off, might have been a little startling to the nerves of a timorous or fastidious person; while the ostentatious display of "life-preservers" hinted at the possibility of drowning too plainly to be altogether agreeable to one who was not insured against that mode of leaving the world, by a premonition that he was reserved for a certain other fashion of exit.

Nobody, however, was shot, stabbed, or drowned, and the brave vessel, passing within sight of the green hills of Cuba and Hayti, and the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, dashed with never-resting wheels among the islands of the Caribbean Sea, and at length, on the eleventh day, lay motionless as a captured whale, at the dock at Aspinwall, the Atlantic terminus of the Panama Railway.

If the map proudly displayed by the enthusiastic draughtsman of the Company is to be accepted as prophetic, Aspinwall is destined to be a wonderful city. Broad avenues—A, B, C,

* *Panama in 1855.* An Account of the Panama Railroad; of the Cities of Panama and Aspinwall; with Sketches of Life and Character on the Isthmus. By ROBERT TOMES. Harper and Brothers.



CITY OF ASPINWALL.

and so on far down the alphabet—are intersected by streets, to designate which whole squadrons of Roman numerals are pressed into service. Magnificent docks give proof that the interests of commerce are to be duly cared for; while the noble Boulevard surrounding the city, as the “ocean stream” girdled the shield of Achilles, and a spacious “Central Park,” show that devotion to the “Almighty Dollar,” the tutelary genius of America, was not the sole passion in the hearts of the projectors.

It must be confessed that the real Aspinwall hardly corresponds with the ideal existing in the mind of the enthusiastic artist, as our friend the Doctor—for we may as well give him his official title—discovered when he set out on a tour of exploration.

“A hundred or so,” he says, “are about the whole number of houses in Aspinwall. Upon the beach at the northern end of the island are a few scattered buildings, gay with white paint and green blinds, chiefly occupied by the officials of the Panama Railroad, while to the right of these are the works and dépôt of the company with machine shops and reservoirs. The shore at the north curves round, leading easterly to an uncleared portion of the island, where a narrow rim of white beach separates the sea from the impenetrable jungle. As we turn westerly and follow the shore, taking the Mess House as the point of departure, we come upon a building of corrugated iron in progress of erection, intended for the residence of the British Consul, if he will ever have the courage to live in what is only a great target for all the artillery of heaven. The lightning during the rainy season keeps it in a continual blaze of illumination, and I mourned, in common with Colonel Totten, whose house is next door, over several prostrate cocoa-nut palms, which had

been struck down in consequence of their fatal propinquity to the iron-house. As we proceed we pass three wooden, peaked-roofed cottages, with green blinds and verandas, inhabited by employes of the Company; hurry past some ugly whitewashed buildings, which the pale-faced sailor and the melancholy convalescent negro, sitting smoking their pipes on the steps, remind us are hospitals, and soon passing by some outlying huts with half naked negresses and pot-bellied children sunning themselves in front, we make our way into the thicker part of the settlement over marshy pools corrupt with decaying matter, black rotten roots of trees, and all kinds of putrefying offal, which resist even the street-cleaning capacities of those famous black scavengers, the turkey-buzzards, which gather in flocks about it. We now get upon the railroad track, which leads us into the main street. A meagre row of houses facing the water, made up of the railroad office, a store or two, some half dozen lodging and drinking establishments, and the ‘Lone Star,’ bounds the so-called street on one side, and the railroad track, upon its embankment of a few feet above the level of the shore, bounds the other.

“There is another and only one other street, which you reach by crossing a wooden bridge, that a sober man can only safely traverse by dint of deliberate care in the day-time, and a drunken man never, and which stretches over a large sheet of water that ebbs and flows in the very centre of the so-called city. This second street begins at the coral beach at the northern end of the island, and runs southward until it terminates in a swamp. At the two extremities houses bound it on both sides; in the middle there is a narrow pathway over an insecure foot-bridge, with some tumble-down pine buildings on one side only, with their foundations soaking

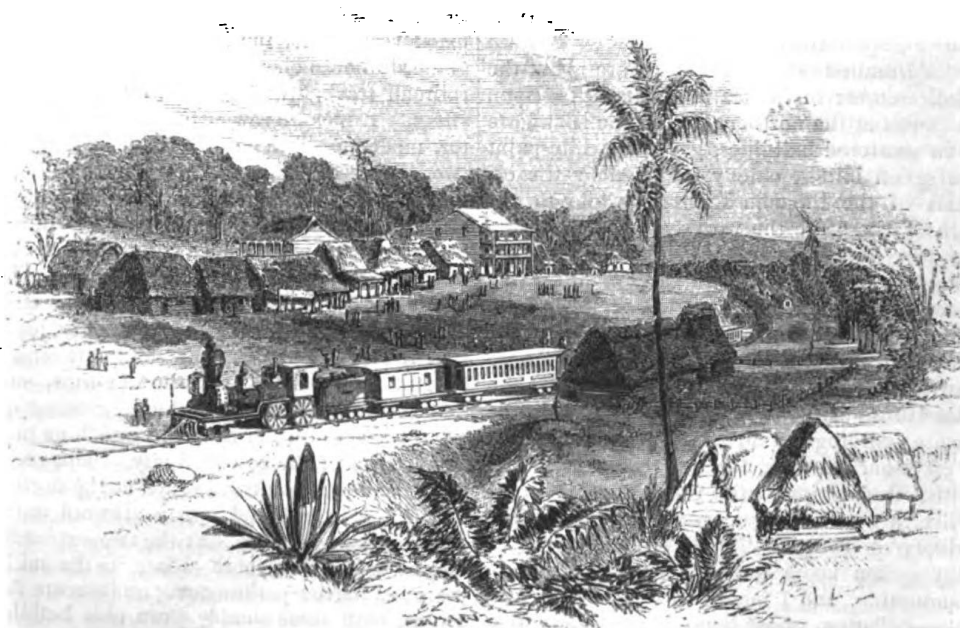
in the swamp, their back windows inhaling the malaria from the manzanilla jungle in the rear, and their front ones opening upon the dirty water, which we have already described, that fills up the central part of the city. The hotels—great, straggling, wooden houses—gape here with their wide open doors, and catch California travelers, who are sent away with a fever as a memento of the place, and shops, groggeries, billiard-rooms, and drinking saloons thrust out their flaring signs to entice the passer-by. All the houses in Aspinwall are wooden, with the exception of the stuccoed Railroad office, the British Consul's precarious corrugated iron dwelling, and a brick building in the course of erection under the slow hands of some Jamaica negro masons. The more pretensions of the wooden buildings were sent out from Maine or Georgia bodily.

"The inhabitants of Aspinwall—some eight hundred in number—are of every variety of race and shade in color. The railroad officials, steamboat agents, foreign consuls, and a score of Yankee traders, hotel-keepers, billiard markers, and bar-tenders, comprise all the whites, who are the exclusive few. The better class of shop-keepers are mulattoes from Jamaica, St. Domingo, and the other West Indian Islands, while the dispensers of cheap grog, and hucksters of fruit and small wares are chiefly negroes. The main body of the population is made up of laborers, grinning coal-black negroes from Jamaica, yellow natives of mixed African and Indian blood, and sad, sedate, turbaned Hindoos, the poor exiled Coolies from the Ganges."

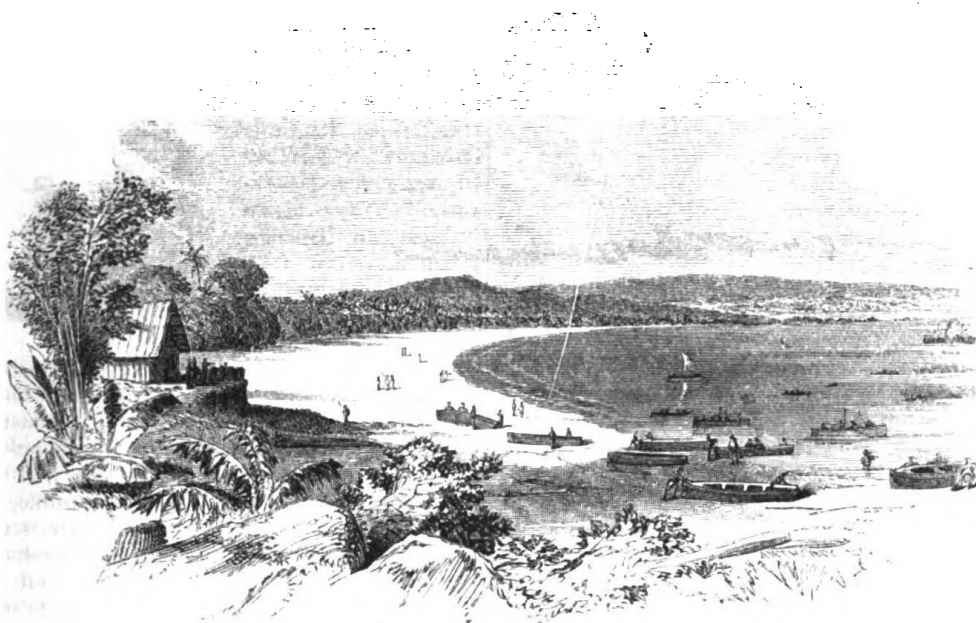
Notwithstanding the profuse hospitality of his hosts, with Champagne cocktails and choice Havanas *ad libitum*, the Doctor could not find it in his heart to be grieved at the announcement that the grand expedition across the Isthmus

was about to be made. In addition to its own habitual fever, Aspinwall was in a fever of excitement in anticipation of the great event. Speeches and counter-speeches were to be delivered, and duly reported for the New York Press. Those who expected to be "most unexpectedly called upon to fill a gap," showed a praiseworthy diligence in preparing the materials, and in rehearsing their speeches to each other, so as to provide against any possibility of failure. The appointed hour at length came, and the train left the dépôt, amidst a general waving of the star-spangled banner from the shipping, and a display of miniature copies of the same from the hotels and drinking saloons; while from the balcony of the "Lone Star" a single white female waved her white handkerchief in adieu. The negroes were especially delighted. A party of them had taken possession of a rusty old cannon, which they kept firing off with uproarious glee that was soon turned to wailing, when one of them was mortally wounded by a premature discharge. The poor Coolies alone were apparently unmoved amidst the general excitement. They gazed with Eastern apathy upon the scene. What mattered it to them that another link was completed in the chain that binds together the Occident and the Orient?

"For seven miles the road passes through a deep marsh, in which the engineers, during the original survey, struggled breast-high, day after day, and yet, in spite of such toilsome and perilous labor, fixed their steady eyes straight forward, went on step by step, and accomplished their purpose. These seven miles are firm now as a stone pavement. Piles upon piles have been driven deep down into the spongy soil, and the foundation covered thick with a persistent earth, brought from Monkey Hill, which



THE SUMMIT, PANAMA RAILROAD.



PACIFIC TERMINUS OF PANAMA RAILROAD.

overhangs the railroad track two miles from Aspinwall.

"On we go, dry shod, over the marsh, through the forest, which shuts out with its great walls of verdure on either side, the hot sun, and darkens the road with a perpetual shade. The luxuriance of the vegetation is beyond the powers of description. Now we pass impenetrable thickets of mangroves, rising out of deep marshes, and sending from each branch down into the earth, and from each root into the air, offshoots which gather together into a matted growth, where the observer seeks in vain to unravel the mysterious involution of trunk, root, branch, and foliage. Now we come upon gigantic *españos* and *coratos*, with girths of thirty feet, and statures of a hundred and thirty feet, out of a single trunk of which, without a plank or a seam, the natives build great vessels of twelve tons burden.

"Again we cross a stream, rippling between banks of verdant growth, where the graceful bamboo waves over the water its feathery top, and the groves of the vegetable ivory palm, intermingled with the wild fig-tree, spread their shade, and rustling gently in the breeze, whisper a slight murmur of solitude in the ear, and suggest a passing dream of repose."

At Gatun, seven miles from Aspinwall, the first halt was made. We who remained at home read in the papers gorgeous accounts of the triumphal arch flung over the road, and the irrepressible burst of enthusiasm which greeted the passing train. Our author's recollections of the scene hardly come up to the florid description of the enthusiastic reporter. He remembers having seen one white man, two negroes, and a Coolie mounted on the top of a clay bank in front of a ruinous hut, shouting with all their might, and firing a salute from an old blunderbuss.

Passing Bujo Soldado, where stands a picturesque cottage which was formerly the favorite residence of the lamented John L. Stephens, while upon the Isthmus, the train reached Barancoas, where the road crosses the Chagres river by a bridge 600 feet in length. It is built of pine, brought from Georgia. Its massive timbers seemed as though they might endure for ages; but such is the destructive character of the climate that in a twelvemonth they must be replaced. To the west looms up the Cierro Gigante, the loftiest summit upon the Isthmus, whence Balboa saw at one glance the bright waters of the two oceans. Another short stage brought the train to the spot which had been selected for the site of a monument to Stephens, Aspinwall, and Chauncey, the original projectors of the Panama Road. The train stopped, and two sturdy negroes panted up the gentle acclivity, bearing the corner-stone of the proposed monument, and our Minister to Granada delivered a speech, of which copies were duly forwarded to the papers at home; where we hope it was read with more attention than seems to have been accorded to it by hungry listeners.

Another seven miles brought the train to the summit of the line, 250 feet above the level of the Pacific. Here has been the heaviest work upon the line. A "deep cutting," 1300 feet long, and 24 feet deep, has been dug through a soft soil, which every rain washes down upon the road, requiring a numerous force of laborers to keep the track clear. A rapid descent of 70 feet to the mile conquers the descent upon the Pacific side. Then a few miles of level track, and the train reaches Panama, stopping on the very verge of the shore of the broad Pacific. The transit from ocean to ocean has occupied just four and a half hours, including the time lost in listening to speeches.

Panama was very quiet just then. The Californians, going and returning, had all left for their several destinations, and the visitors had abundance of leisure to wander about the town and see the few sights, and observe the people. There is the spruce-looking Padre, in long silk surplice, lined with pink satin. A cocked hat, fringed and tasseled, covers his reverend head; and his lower members are encased in silken hose, and polished shoes with golden buckles. His golden-headed cane, the jaunty air with which he puffs his cigar, and the gallantry with which he accosts the females of his flock, show that he is no anchorite.

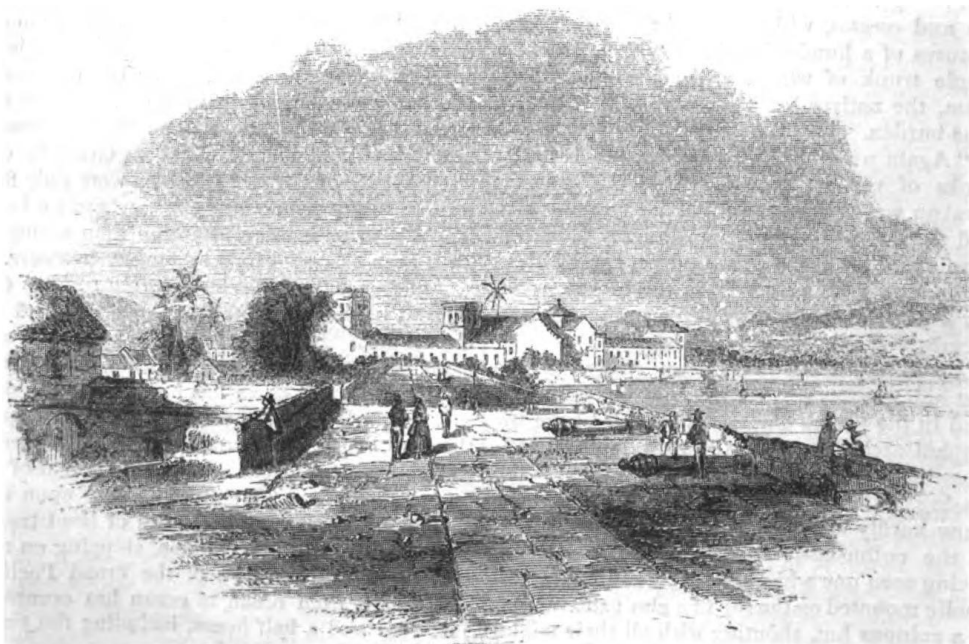


Then came a slouchy negro woman, with long black hair streaming down her back. Her garments are any thing but superfluous, and, in accordance with the custom of the Isthmus, the flounces are at the top, instead of the bottom of the skirt. She carries a child astride upon her hip, which looks as though it was fashioned for that special purpose. She, too, is smoking the perpetual cigar. Next may come a mother and child gayly tricked out in loose calico dresses, of the most flaming colors and startling patterns. Broad-brimmed, bright-ribboned Panama hats cover their heads; and

satin slippers are stuck upon the tips of their toes. The child is a perfect fac-simile of the mother in all but size. From hat to slipper they are dressed alike. One fancies that he is looking at the mother through a spy-glass reversed. They evidently belong to the upper class, and are fully aware of the magnificence of their appearance, as they pace along in conscious pride through the streets. Another characteristic denizen of Panama presents himself in the person of the water-carrier, mounted on his mule. He is just returning from outside the walls, where he has filled his kegs from the orange-shaded spring, and is now returning to supply his customers, whose water-jars stand under the balcony, covered with cool moisture. Into the bung-holes he has inserted a tuft of



green leaves, by way of cork; so that, at first sight, one might suppose his water-kegs had spontaneously germinated, and were about to grow up, and perhaps produce a crop of diminutive vessels in their own image and likeness. A shackled mule is cropping the grass in the deserted Plaza; a group of naked black children are playing on the church steps; and a file of galley-slaves are marching through the streets. Inside the churches, devotees are prostrate before tawdry images of the saints; and frowzy padres are



THE BAMPART OF PANAMA.

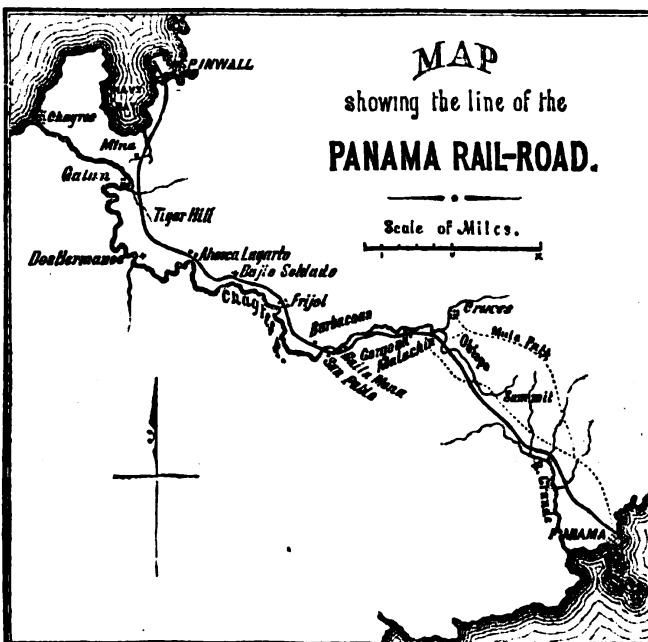
snuffing the candles and peering into the contribution boxes. To remind you of home you look into a drinking saloon, where the fallow bar-keeper is concocting a sherry-cobbler for a fever-stricken Yankee; a brace of dark-haired natives are making wonderful strokes at the billiard table; and a group of Spaniards and Frenchmen are playing dominoes and sipping absinthe. This appears to be about the sum-total of life in Panama.

The rampart speaks of the days when the memory of Morgan was fresh in men's minds. Its solid foundations, laid two centuries ago, still breast the long waves of the Pacific. But the wall is in ruins; the loopholes are rent and jagged; the beautiful guns lie dismounted. A few barefooted mulatto soldiers, clad in loose linen jackets and trousers, with red woolen caps on their heads, smoke their cigars, and strive to keep up the appearance of a military post. But it is all a sham. The descendants of the Castilian conquerors, here as every where else, are a worn-out and effete race. People and town alike have fallen into decay. The government is too feeble to exercise the ordinary duties of police, and has been obliged to give into the hands of foreigners the duty of preserving order on the Isthmus. The right of punishment, even to life and death, without appeal, has been granted to the Railroad Company. What the government is unable to accomplish, is performed by a guard of forty men, headed by Ran Runnels, famed as a Texas Ranger, who have cleared the Isthmus of robbers, and keep the thousands of unruly laborers in awe.

Two centuries ago Panama was the centre of the trade between Europe and Western America. It was a gorgeous city, whose merchants were princes. Their warehouses were filled with gold, silver, spices, and precious stuffs; and their dwellings were adorned with all that wealth could procure. But the discovery of the passage round Cape Horn turned the trade into a new channel. With the decline of the Spanish power the last gleam of prosperity departed; and since the Isthmus has been divided into feeble states, the decay has gone on with accelerated speed. For a short time the California emigration infused a spark of life into the stagnant city. But it was a spasmodic activity. The two thousand foreigners who were there congregated in 1850, have fallen to a few hundreds; and the native population was never fairly aroused from their death-like lethargy. The majority of the natives are a mongrel race, in whose veins White, Indian, and Negro blood is mingled in every conceivable proportion. Yet these are every way super-

rior to the few who boast an unmixed Castilian descent. It is fearfully probable that no race of whites can escape deterioration upon the Isthmus. The indomitable energy which braves every hardship, and overcomes every visible obstacle, yields to the fatal influence of the climate; and each generation sinks lower than the one that preceded it. Yet the prize of the commerce between the East and the West is too great to be abandoned without a desperate struggle. It is hardly to be thought of that this narrow Isthmus should be suffered to add ten thousand miles to the voyage between New York and San Francisco.

With the commerce between California and the East for a prize, it would at first sight seem to be no extraordinary achievement to construct a railway of less than fifty miles in length, where there were no broad rivers to cross, no rocky ridges to excavate, and no deep valleys to fill up. But the Panama route presented obstacles more formidable than these visible and tangible ones. The materials for the construction and equipment of the road were all to be brought from a distance. Not only were the tools and iron work to be conveyed from the United States and from England, but, although the country abounded in forests, the very wood upon which the rails were to rest, and of which the bridges were to be constructed, was the product of Maine and Georgia, and the food for the laborers must be sought in the markets of the Atlantic cities. The tropical climate, which stimulates the powers of nature, whether of production or destruction, to an activity unknown in temperate regions, wrought in both directions with unrelenting activity against the enterprise. Thick jungles had to be pierced, which reproduced themselves almost as rapidly as they were cut down. The way once cleared, if left to itself, would be overgrown again in a



twelvemonth. The destruction of dead material is as rapid as the growth of the living. A month does the work of a year. The most solid timber, exposed to the action of the climate and the insects, decays in a twelvemonth. Bridges, stations, tanks, houses must be built of stone or iron to be permanent.

But worse than all these is the pestilential climate, with which no race of men and no strength of constitution can contend; and against which no measure of precaution and no process of acclimation is a safeguard. No man could hope to escape the terrible "Panama fever" for more than a few weeks, or months at most. If the patient survived the violence of the first attack, the poison remained in the system, and he could hope for no perfect recovery so long as he remained on the Isthmus. And those who had apparently recovered by seeking a more healthy climate, succumbed at once on their return. "I never met," says our author, speaking as a medical man, "with a wholesome-looking person among all those engaged upon the railroad. There was not one whose constitution had not been sapped by disease."

The laborers upon the road were sought from every country, and there was a marked difference in the rapidity with which different races yielded to the miasma. The African resisted it longest; next came the Coolie; then the European races; and last of all the poor Chinaman, who succumbed at once. A ship-load of eight hundred of these poor Celestials landed at Panama. Of these thirty-two were prostrated almost at the moment of landing; in four or five days eighty more lay by their side; and in as many weeks there was hardly one who was fit for labor. They gave themselves up to despair, and sought for death at once, rather than await its rapid and inevitable approach. Hundreds destroyed themselves. Some persuaded their companions to kill them. Some seated themselves on the beach at low-water, and lighting their pipes, grimly waited for the rising tide to engulf them. Some strangled themselves, in default of a better means, with their own cherished pig-tails. Some impaled themselves upon sharpened stakes or the implements of their labor. In a space of time incredibly short, six hundred of the eight were dead, and the miserable remnant, hardly alive, and wholly unfit for labor, were shipped to Jamaica, where they linger out a life if possible more wretched than that of their countrymen whom a heartless cupidity brought to our own city, and then, failing in its object, abandoned here.

Hardly less terrible was the fate of a ship-load of Irish laborers, fresh from their green island. So rapidly did they give way to the fearful poison pervading the atmosphere, that not one of them was ever able to perform a full day's labor; and the miserable survivors, shipped to New York, died almost to a man of the fever contracted during their brief stay upon the Isthmus.

Nature seemed determined that the "door of the seas" should not be opened. Yet in spite of the obstacles which she interposed, and in spite even of the unexpected cost of the work, the enterprise went steadily on, until in five years from the time when ground was first broken, the first locomotive traversed the whole space from ocean to ocean. It is a wonderful triumph of man's indomitable will over the hostile powers of nature, visible and invisible. But the victory has been won at a fearful cost of life and health. Whether—leaving these out of view, and looking at the matter in a merely pecuniary point of view—the enterprise is a success or a failure, is still a question. Wall Street counts up the millions already expended in the construction of the road, and the other millions required to keep it in operation, and shaking its head, asks dubiously, "Will it pay?"

We, certainly, most devoutly hope that it may.